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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for social workers to commit themselves to working with persons with developmental disabilities and the need for social workers to gain expertise in the field of developmental disabilities. Problems within the social work profession and the field of developmental disabilities that have prohibited the meeting of these two realms are addressed, and personal stories are shared to further illustrate these barriers to cooperation. A model is presented for involving university schools of social work with developmental disability agencies through field experience programs. The paper stresses the benefits of social worker engagement with individuals with disabilities, including social justice for persons with developmental disabilities. (Contains 22 references.) (CR)

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Social Work Education and Mental Retardation: A Vision of Bridging the Gap in the New Millennium

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Introduction

Practice with people with developmental disabilities has not been the career choice of most social workers. While the NASW Code of Ethics calls for commitment to oppressed populations, research and practice in the area of developmental disabilities, one of the most oppressed populations, has not been in the forefront. Schools of social work do not regularly incorporate this population in their curriculum, perhaps due to a lack of experience and knowledge on the part of social work faculty. Social Workers who do choose to make developmental disabilities their primary field of practice often are employed by agencies in which they are the only social worker, leaving these practitioners feeling disconnected from their profession. Additionally, developmental disabilities is usually not attended to by social work organizations such as NASW leading to further isolation of the practitioner in this field. This may lead to either a change in commitment to this population by the practitioner or a disconnect of the practitioner to the profession, thus leaving a limited number of social workers to formally or informally solicit the involvement of other social work professionals with this population.

Not only should social workers have a commitment to this population by way of social work's commitment to social justice for the oppressed, the profession of social work has much to offer the field of developmental disabilities. Current trends in the field of developmental disabilities include a commitment to strengthening natural supports and person-centered planning. Both of these activities have roots grounded in social work. Social work has long had a commitment to strengthening client systems as a way of assisting the client to meet his or her needs and overcome barriers. The social worker looks to natural supports, such as family, as central to the client's well being and thus

treats and assists not only the client, but the family as well. Similarly, social workers develop treatment plans or contracts based not only on the client's individual need, but on what the client has stated she or he would like to accomplish, involving whatever systems are necessary to aid the client in accomplishing his or her goal. This is at the core of person-centered planning. As the field of developmental disabilities moves toward these ideas in service models, the profession of social work has much to offer in terms of prior experience with these ideas and professional ability to operationalize these concepts.

Yet with the profession of social work's and the field of developmental disabilities' mutual need for one another, still social workers researching and practicing in this field is minimal. This can be attributed to both the lack of interest by social workers seeking employment and study opportunities and the lack of invitation by agencies that serve this population. At the core of this problem is the lack of attention to this problem within schools of social work. Exciting students to work with this population is the best way to bring social workers in the field of developmental disabilities.

The presenters plan to discuss models for involving the school of social work with the developmental disability agency. It is the presenters' contention that by developing and strengthening partnerships between the university and the agency, the university will, in turn, become more aware of their attentiveness to persons with developmental disabilities in their curriculum and that the agency will benefit from the involvement of social work educators and practitioners. The presenters further contend that the partnering of schools of social work with agencies will bring a closer relationship between the social work profession and the field of developmental disabilities. This

partnership would bring about new research, theory, and practice with persons with developmental disabilities. This would be beneficial and enriching to social work education, social work practice, agency services, and, most importantly, persons with developmental disabilities.

Literature

DeWeaver (1982) has noted social workers' relative lack of interest in entering the field of developmental disabilities. Possible contributing factors to this disinterest include: fear of people with disabilities, the challenges of working with a less verbal population, fear of or resistance to working in an institutional setting, and an ignorance of the real potential of people with developmental disabilities (DiNitto & McNeece, 1997, p. 163).

Mental retardation services and the profession of social work developed separately and largely in isolation from each other until the 1960's, when widespread efforts at deinstitutionalization created new opportunities for social workers in direct practice, administration and social welfare policy arenas (DeWeaver, 1995). While this created new opportunities for social workers in this field, social workers' interest in the field still remained role. This may be a function of social work education despite the fact that social work opportunities in this field also provide excellent educational opportunities. Among the many social work activities related to practice with people with developmental disabilities are: individual and family counseling, assessment, participation in interdisciplinary evaluations, developing alternative living and employment opportunities, protective services, casework services, facilitating activities

related to residential placement, and participating in community planning, change, and administrative activities (Horejsi, 1979; DuBois & Miley, 1999, p. 353).

Despite both the need and the opportunity for social workers in the field of developmental disabilities, interest appears to remain low (DiNitto & McNeece, 1997, p. 164). For example, Rubin, Johnson and DeWeaver (1986) found that developmental disabilities ranked twelfth of sixteen fields of practice in their survey of entering MSW students. DeWeaver and Kropf (1992) have also documented social work education's lack of preparation of students for practice in the field of developmental disabilities. Although the total number of social workers practicing in developmental disabilities is difficult to ascertain, in 1994 there were approximately 700 members of the Social Work division of the American Association of Mental Retardation (DeWeaver, 1995).

Survey of Social Work Educators

In preparation for this paper, the authors informally surveyed social workers, social work educators and allied health educators regarding both their own education in the fields of developmental disabilities and mental retardation, and the education provided their students. Although only the most limited conclusion can be drawn from these convenience samples, the results underscored for the authors a lack of education, exposure and familiarity with developmental disabilities among social work educators and practitioners alike.

This sample for this survey of social workers and social work educators was drawn from: (a) two social work faculties in Central Texas, (b) workshop participants at several field instructors' workshops in conjunction with the NASW/Texas State Conference, and (c) participants at several workshops of the 1999 Annual Program

Meeting of the Council on Social Work Education. Despite the diversity of expertise represented in each of these groups, the results showed a uniform lack of knowledge of and/or experience with disabilities in general, including a lack of exposure to mental retardation in both the classroom and field settings.

The results of the authors' survey suggested that both social workers and social work educators have limited knowledge of and exposure to people with disabilities; even less knowledge of and exposure to *developmental disabilities*; and almost no knowledge of or exposure to *mental retardation*.

In a similar survey of health educators in the fields of physical therapy, occupational therapy, health administration, clinical laboratory science, and communication disorders, the authors found identical patterns of ignorance about disabilities in general and mental retardation in particular.

In fairness to many of those disciplines, their accrediting bodies do not mandate curricula related to mental retardation. In contrast, the Council on Social Work Education mandates curriculum content on: human diversity, populations at risk, social and economic justice, and values and ethics (CSWE Curriculum Policy Statement), all of which suggest that content on disability issues should be mandatory in all accredited social work education.

Agency-University Partnership Opportunities

Among the many under-utilized opportunities for agency-university partnerships are opportunities related to: research, grant-writing, field placements, adjunct teaching, job-sharing, program evaluation, practice evaluation, community service, and administrative support.

Creative grant crafting can create new and exciting opportunities for agency-university collaboration in program development, evaluation, and research. Among current areas with extensive grant funding yet limited on-going involvement specifically with developmental disabilities are: child welfare (federal Title IV-E family preservation funding), criminal justice (both institutional and community supervision) and substance abuse. Among people with developmental disabilities, there are significant unmet needs in all three of these broad areas.

Other opportunities for agency-university partnerships include the participation of agency-based social workers on university committees and councils. The sheer presence of the agency practitioner on committees and councils can remind social work faculty of the presence of social work in this area and the need for social workers in this area. Also, this allows for opportunities for the agency-based practitioner to educate social work faculty about research and practice with persons with developmental disabilities. Other opportunities for this exchange include participation in agency fairs, guest lecturing, and involvement with student organizations.

Agency-university partnerships can be effectively used in numerous ways. They can initiate new programs and enhance the evaluation of existing ones. They can be tools for recruiting students in to the field of developmental disabilities. They can enhance staff development and continuing education opportunities in the agency. They can enhance the quality of university-based social work education by funding both adjunct and full-time teaching opportunities for mental retardation professionals.

Field Education

Perhaps the most effective way to both introduce students to developmental disabilities and initiate a partnership with the university is through field education. Field education involves the supervision and instruction of students in agency internships. The student's direct supervisor should be the agency-based social worker. Burge, et. al. (1998) found suggest that next to the influence of prior contact such as a sibling with developmental disabilities, direct graduated contact with this population through fieldwork can best create a positive attitude towards persons with developmental disabilities and that fieldwork experience plays a key role in preparing future social workers for employment serving persons with developmental disabilities.

Various models of field instruction can be found in the literature (Selber, et. al., 1998; Black, 1996; Bolgo and Globerman, 1995). However, most literature regarding field instruction agrees that the partnership between the university and the agency is the cornerstone of an effective field experience. Attentive field instruction may sometimes be difficult for the agency-based social worker who has agency and client demands on her or his time. While the student can benefit the practitioner by alleviating some of the responsibilities, at least initially, the supervision and instruction of a student can create more time constraints. Add to this the fact that most universities limit the definition of appropriate learning activities for the student, and the practitioner may question his or her ability to provide adequate supervision and instruction and meet the demands of their daily job activities. In order to address these concerns, the presenters have developed a model for field instruction that both meets the educational demands of the university and provides the practitioner and student with a organized learning environment. By utilizing

this model, the practitioner can organize her or his time so that as to meet agency demands and provide solid instruction and supervision of the student. In time, the student will be able to assist the practitioner in providing the full range of services to the agency and its clientele.

The following model is based on a combination of relevant literature and the experiences of students, faculty, and field instructors.

1. The first component is the orientation process. The student should participate in the agency's regular orientation at the beginning of the practicum (internship) or as quickly thereafter as possible. Orientation classes may be arranged by the student's field instructor or supervisor based on that particular student's background and experience. Further, the field instructor should take the time early in the practicum to orient the student to the job and how it will tie into his or her overall education. While this may seem cumbersome early on, it will save time in the long run and will make for better education of the student, as well as, increasing the student's ability to carry out agency tasks.
2. The field instructor (agency-based social worker) should set a time to meet for at least one hour weekly with the student. This gives the student a sense of security knowing that he or she will get the opportunity to meet with her or his instructor given the busy schedules of agency social workers. This also gives the field instructor a set time in his or her schedule to provide supervision to the student and keep tabs on the student's interactions. Although an hour a week may again seem cumbersome, this will actually save the field instructor time as the student can ask questions during this set time, rather than having to have constant attentions. It is important to note that

this time should be set even if the student is shadowing the social worker or offices with the social worker. Five minutes here and there will not facilitate learning and will also become inefficient for the social worker.

3. The student should be allowed time to shadow the social worker initially. Even if the student is at an advanced level, watching the social worker helps her or him gain knowledge of the job. There should be time scheduled after shadowing activities for processing the activity.
4. The social worker (field instructor) should determine appropriate tasks for the student in advance. This may include, but are not limited to, individual and group counseling, case management, social assessments, self-advocacy groups, grant writing, home visits, and, as the student progresses, coordinating interdisciplinary team meetings.
5. The social worker (field instructor) should be prepared to spend more time teaching and supervising the student initially than the student will spend in productive tasks for the agency. However, if time is well spent, the student will eventually become an asset to the agency.
6. The student should be asked to keep a journal of his or her day to day activities. This will assist the student and the field instructor in setting productive agendas for each instructional setting. This will also allow the field instructor a direction for teaching and supervision. The student can also use the journal for self-reflection.
7. The student should provide a copy of her or his class syllabi to the field instructor so that field education can correspond with classroom education. Also, some university

classes require the field instructor's signature on concurrent assignments. This allows the field instructor and the student to plan for these assignments.

8. The social worker should spend time reacquainting himself or herself with current theory. This will not only benefit the student, but will also keep practice techniques fresh.
9. There will be a liaison assigned from the university. The student and the field instructor should not hesitate to call upon this person for guidance and assistance. If the social worker takes it upon herself or himself to make early contact with the liaison, the relationship can be established early on allowing for a smoother flow once the internship has begun.
10. Most students will be asked to develop an educational plan and the field instructor will be asked to evaluate the student based on this plan. The student and field instructor should take care in the development of this plan, making certain that the expectations are appropriate and realistic. This will allow for less time spent in evaluation as well as clearly outline expectations in order to avoid problematic misunderstandings.
11. Again, planning ahead on the part of the field instructor cannot be emphasized enough. This will allow the field instructor a chance to really examine gaps in agency services that the student can fill. This will also save time in the long run.
12. In planning student activities, the field instructor should tailor the activities to the student's educational level. The field instructor can easily accomplish this by asking the student what courses he or she has taken or is taking. This, combined with the

student's stated interests, can assist the field instructor in determining appropriate, accomplishable tasks for the student.

13. The field instructor should take this opportunity to challenge the student to become interested in work with persons with developmental disabilities. The field instructor can do this by showing her or his enthusiasm about the population and letting the student see his or her commitment.

14. The final and most important step to this model is for the social worker to relax and have fun! The social worker can bounce ideas off the student or have the student help implement a project the social worker has not had time to implement.

Using this model will help save time and provide an experience that is rewarding for the student, the social worker, the agency, the clientele, and the profession.

Reflections from a Social Work Practitioner

We have been talking in the social work sections of this conference about the disconnect, or gap, between social work education and the field of services for persons with developmental disabilities. I am in complete agreement that there is such a gap. I also believe that it is a gap that extends throughout the field of social work. The failure of social work graduates, and practitioners of all ages, to join the professional organization, NASW, illustrates that gap. The gap is further illustrated by the fact that so few practitioners participate in their local chapters. The gap is illustrated by my reaction each year when I receive the NASW dues statement, and I ask myself (as so many others do), "Why should I pay this? What does it do for me?" The gap is illustrated by the fact that so many social service agencies do not affiliate with the profession of social work, and denigrate the field of social work, by emphasizing a narrow focus of function with

their cliental, rather than a broader focus on the "whole person, in their social context;" a professional social work emphasis. Of the six or so agencies with which I have been employed the last twenty-five years, none has had a primarily social work focus. Two of them have had social work departments, but with a very narrow focus. The current agency with which I am employed, works with persons with developmental disabilities. It does not have any designated social work functions, and the Director has specifically indicated that she "does not believe in the profession, but rather the function."

This gap, or disconnect, between social service agencies, social workers, and the profession can, I believe, best be addressed by the schools of social work. The college and university system has a long and deep history of importance and prestige in western culture. It is even more available and attractive in our current world. Because the schools of social work are embedded in the college and university system and culture, they have the potential for a much greater impact on individuals and their communities than is presently being realized. The schools of social work are the points of entry into the social work field. They are the points of accumulation of knowledge and development of theory. They are the entry point for the socialization of the social work professional.

Because of the setting in this deep and dynamic cultural institution and its attractiveness to individuals and communities, the schools of social work have the greatest potential to renew the professional; to broaden and deepen the influence of social work services in the communities and the social service agencies of the communities.

Schools of social work have always seen their mission as directly linked to practice at the micro level through the practicum process. Now, I believe that they must

begin to see themselves as the main source of developing and renewing the profession at the overall community and professional level. The last polling of the profession indicated that Social Work Practitioners are desirous of regional opportunities for renewal and socialization about the large issues of social work through conferences, etc. The schools of social work as major regional fixtures are well positioned geographically to play this role.

I have throughout my career lived at the most within a hundred miles of at least one school of social work, and generally several. I have never been contacted to play an active part in their function, other than by form letter, which did not have much motivation for me. I have never been asked to participate, or solicited to donate funds to the school of social work from which I received my masters degree, even though my research project for my degree was chosen to be presented at a regional conference of AAMR. The school of engineering form that university, however, somehow managed to begin soliciting my donation to their work.

I believe that the schools of social work must begin to be active, from the Dean through the faculty and staff, in their communities. They must become active in interacting with the social service agencies, directors, and staff, whether or not they have social workers employed. The schools of social work must begin to engage their communities by sponsoring and facilitating community colloquiums on their social issues. I believe the schools of social work could have a powerful impact by engaging the direct practicing social workers in the classroom, and in planning and carrying out the community forums. Then all sectors of social services, including mental retardation and

developmental disabilities, will better work to bridge the gap to full citizenship and participation in our society.

Conclusion

The need for social workers to commit themselves to working with persons with developmental disabilities and the need for social workers expertise in the field of developmental disabilities have been confirmed in this presentation. Problems within both the social work profession and the field of developmental disabilities that have prohibited the meeting of these two realms have been discussed as well as personal stories shared that further illustrate this point. At the heart of this presentation has been the need to involve social work education in introducing more social workers to work with persons with developmental disabilities. The presenters have suggested that partnerships between the agency and the school of social work would do much toward future change. The presenters have offered several models for beginning a partnership between the agency and the university. Pursuing these partnerships across the country could only bring about positive change. The introduction of more social workers interested in service to persons with developmental disabilities could on enhance social work practice, social work education, agency services, social justice for persons with developmental disabilities, and, most importantly, the lives of persons with developmental disabilities.

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